

*'when gorse is in flower,
kissing is in season' ... anon*

There are many floral delights to be discovered during a stroll across the heath at Shotover. This leaflet introduces a selection of the heathland and acidic grassland flora that can be enjoyed throughout the spring and summer.

FLOWERS OF THE HEATH

Two of the most characteristic flowers of heathland are **Gorse** (*Ulex europaeus*) and **Heather** (*Calluna vulgaris*).



Gorse

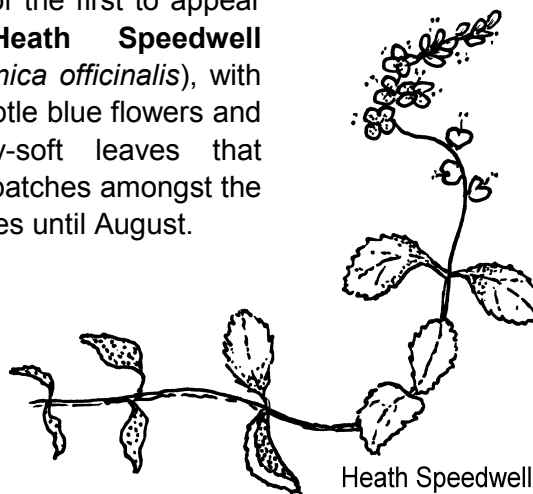
Gorse flowers give off an aroma like coconut which can be detected most strongly in the summer when the flowers are most prolific. The plant does in fact flower most of the year round, reflected in the saying: 'when gorse is in flower, kissing is in season!'

The type of heather at Shotover is Ling Heather. It provides an evocative haze of purple from July to September. Wild bees can be seen (and heard!) busily taking nectar and pollen from the flowers. The 'mats' of dense heather support a great diversity of small animals, insects and other wildlife.

As well as these well-known expanses of heathland colour, there are smaller less obvious plants that are as much part of the heathland as the gorse and heather.

Passing through Mary Sadler's Field in spring, the grassy areas begin their transformation from a uniform green to an array of colours; from soft purples and blues, through to sparkling whites and bold yellows.

One of the first to appear is **Heath Speedwell** (*Veronica officinalis*), with its subtle blue flowers and downy-soft leaves that form patches amongst the grasses until August.



Heath Speedwell

This is quickly followed by the delicate white flowers of **Heath Bedstraw** (*Galium saxatile*) which has a square stalk and whorls of leaves.

From June to August the strikingly bold yellow of **Slender St John's-wort** (*Hypericum pulchrum*) appears amongst the heather and gorse. It grows to about 40cm tall and has a distinct flush of red on the yellow petals. This handsome, scarce plant is thriving on the heath.

Ants run off with new plant !

An exciting recent find on Shotover Hill is **Heath Milkwort** (*Polygala serpyllifolia*).

This exquisite local rarity was thought lost from Shotover for many years, but was rediscovered by *Shotover Wildlife* in 2006.

The seeds of Heath Milkwort are intriguing as they have a close association with ants, which carry the seeds off to new places. The ants are attracted to the seed because it has a gland which contains a nutritious substance that the ants feed on.

Heath Milkwort is one of the plants in the *Shotover Wildlife Species Recovery Programme* (see back panel), and our trials so far have been most encouraging.

FLOWERS OF THE ACID GRASSLAND

'Lowland Acid Grassland' is a specific type of low-altitude grassland on acidic soils. Open grassy habitats with this soil type are uncommon in Oxfordshire and across the UK. Consequently the grassland supports equally scarce plants.

Grassland annuals tend to be small, so you have to look quite hard to find them. **Bird's-foot** (*Ornithopus perpusillus*), and **Sand Spurrey** (*Spergularia rubra*) are two such plants.

Both Bird's-foot and Sand Spurrey depend on disturbance to the soil. On Shotover visitors and grazing rabbits both play an important role in the continued succession of these tiny plants.

Look out for Bird's-foot from May to August. It has minute white flowers with red veins. The plant's name relates to the clusters of long, knobbly seedpods that look just like the bony foot of a bird. (Bird's-foot should not be confused with Bird's-foot Trefoil, a common plant in Shotover's grasslands, with yellow flowers).

Sand Spurrey is pink, and flowers from May to September. It only opens its petals in sunshine, making it difficult to find on a cloudy day.

Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Pilosella officinarum*) as the name suggests, resembles a mouse's ear, in that the leaf is downy-soft with white hairs. Flowers appear from May to August and are yellow with a red stripe on the underside of the petal.

Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*) is a scarce and vulnerable plant on Shotover's heath. It is an important pollen and nectar source for insects and is on the *Shotover Wildlife Species Recovery Programme* (see back panel).

Narrow-leaved Hawkweed (*Hieracium umbellatum*) is found in dry heathy places and is not at all common in Oxfordshire. The species is only known from a single location on Shotover, and is a tall plant with yellow dandelion-like flowers. Leafy Hawkweed (*Hieracium perpropinquum*) is similar but is better established on the hill.

The Species Recovery Programme

In October 2006 *Shotover Wildlife* launched one of its most important initiatives of recent years. The *Species Recovery Programme* aims to recover and stabilize Shotover's most vulnerable flora, a number of which occur on the heath and acid grassland, such as Milkwort, Harebell, and Narrow-leaved Hawkweed. Other vulnerable plants occur in Brasenose Wood.

The plants in the Programme have been adopted by *Shotover Wildlife* members who undertake the necessary work to safeguard the species for the future.

Shotover Wildlife is an independent voluntary organisation founded to research and communicate the importance of Shotover Hill for wildlife

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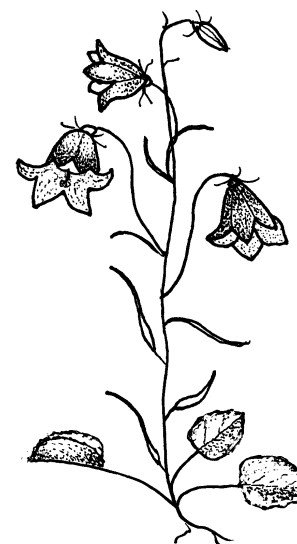
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Cover: Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*)
Leaflet written & illustrated by Jacqueline Wright

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HEATHLAND FLOWERS

on SHOTOVER



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